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Date 25 OCTOBER 1987.

BOOKS

'Veil': Woodward's latest book is a drab and mechanical look at the CIA

Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987. Bob Woodward. Simon & Schuster. 543 pages. $21.95.

Someday someone, perhaps an eminent scholar, is going to write a riveting biography of William J. Casey. The late CIA director was not just another in the colorless procession of socialites (Richard Helms) and technocrats (Adm. Stansfield Turner) who traditionally have supervised the U.S. espionage establishment. Part James Bond, part Perry Mason and perhaps part Al Capone, Casey was, at the very least, an American original, a colorful and strong-willed character who sought to remold one of the U.S. government's most complicated and suffocating bureaucracies in his own swashbuckling image.

"Veil," Bob Woodward's much-ballyhooed CIA expose, probably will be consulted by future Casey scholars as an important, if patchy, outline of Casey's years at the agency's Langley, Va., headquarters. A definitive biography of Casey "Veil" is definitely not, although Mr. Woodward says this was not his intention.

"Veil" is an interesting, and occasionally revealing, collection of anecdotes about Casey himself and CIA operations on his watch. But considering the dramatic potential of the subject matter, Mr. Woodward's presentation is rather drab and mechanical. Although there is no good reason to disbelieve his assertion that he held as many as four dozen substantive conversations with the late CIA chief — and even secretly infiltrated the hospital room where Casey was recovering from brain surgery — Mr. Woodward's narrative does not take advantage of this remarkable access to bring Casey vividly to life.

Mr. Woodward reports that Casey mumbled and sometimes smelled of body odor and that he so liked to take risks that he once apparently planted a bug himself in the office of a foreign dignitary. But Mr. Woodward never conveys exactly what made Casey tick. Was it political zealotry? Was it love of adventure? Or even a sense of duty? To build such a picture of the late CIA boss, Mr. Woodward might have had to make some personal judgments about Casey, which evidently he was reluctant to do.

Although he is willing to use determined, perhaps even devious, methods to acquire his scoops, Mr. Woodward goes out of his way to present them in this book in the same deadpan, just-the-facts-ma'am style he uses to report stories in the *Washington Post*. It undoubtedly helps Mr. Woodward's credibility that he does not overindulge in the racy, and sometimes too-good-to-be true, dialogue that enlivens much of what passes for non-fiction reportage today. But Mr. Woodward could have made more firm judgments about Casey's life without necessarily manufacturing quotes. In "Wired," his spellbinding portrait of the self-destructive antics of comedian John Belushi, for example, Mr. Woodward's engrossing portrait of the actor is propelled by the author's evident conclusion that Belushi's drug-taking was bad. This was a simple judgment, but one that gave the sordid facts flesh and blood.

Had he allowed himself to develop even the mildest passion about Casey or his achievements (constructive or destructive), Mr. Woodward might have painted a more vivid picture of a historical figure he had a rare opportunity to know. But there is much about this book that is incomplete, although because of the difficulty of the subject matter, Mr. Woodward should be forgiven for many of its flaws.

For a start, it is in the simple nature of national security and espionage reporting that reporters can never find out everything that is going on. When journalists do find out something exceptionally sensitive, sometimes they cannot print it. While it is impossible to know whether Mr. Woodward found out a lot he did not print, this book seems to demonstrate there was a lot he didn't find out. For instance, while he paints a detailed portrait of the meteoric rise and fall of Max Hugel, the dubious businessman chosen by Casey to head the CIA's covert action squad, Mr. Woodward says little about the schemes, if any, that Mr. Hugel dreamed up while he was actually working as Casey's lieutenant.

Mr. Woodward also seems to spend a disproportionate amount of space discussing the CIA's obsessions with Libya's Col. Muammar el Kadafi, for events over the last year have taught us that the real story of the Reagan administration's clandestine foreign policy lies in its dealings with the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran. Mr. Woodward's final section on the Iran-contra scandal, which includes the tale of his controversial deathbed interview with Casey, looks as if it were tacked on. Meanwhile, because he even hesitates to make judgments about the relative importance of the stories he uncovers, Mr. Woodward sometimes gives unwarranted prominence to disclosures that are secret but of little consequence, such as his revelation that Adm. Bobby Inman, the CIA's deputy director, once apparently planted his own spy on the Senate Intelligence Committee.

There may well be enough new and interesting material in "Veil" to earn the book its undoubted future status as a best seller. But serious students of the CIA and its late director ought to hold their breath in the hope that one day Mr. Woodward again turns his formidable reportorial talents to the subject and next time sets himself a more leisurely and reflective pace.

—MARK HOSENBALL

Mr. Hosenball reports from Washington for the Sunday Times of London.

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In Woodward's words

Bob Woodward says he knew "Veil" would be controversial. Still, he says he was surprised at the reaction to the final section, which relates his much-questioned deathbed visit to CIA Director William Casey.

"I think people at first focused a lot on the final meeting without seeing the rest of the book as well," Mr. Woodward said in a telephone interview from his office at the *Washington Post*. "People are now reading the book and seeing it is about government and how it operates. . . . It's a pretty detailed, rather cool account of what was going on — somewhat dispassionate, I think."

In "Veil," he tells of reading to Casey a passage from the John le Carre novel, "Smiley's People," that Mr. Woodward also had cited in his review of the book for the *Post*: "In every operation there is an above the line and a below the line. Above the line is what you do by the book. Below the line is how you do the job." Although he asked whether Casey agreed or disagreed with the statement, he says the director never did answer.

Mr. Woodward now says, "Obviously, Casey believed it ultimately: You had to go 'off the books' and circumvent the law. I don't agree and it's not just my belief. It's written into the law and the current CIA director, William Webster, says as much. I don't know that it works in a democracy. It ultimately comes out and leads to a trauma."

In addition to real-life spying, Casey and Mr. Woodward shared an interest in spy novels. "I'm kind of an addict of those," the author confessed. "I read almost all of them, even the obscure ones. . . . Casey loved them, too."

As for the moral issues of spying that Graham Greene, le Carre and others have raised, Mr. Woodward believes Casey was aware of them, although his image might not have suggested so. "There was some self-doubt in Casey — not a whole lot, but a touch of it," he says. "[But] he believed he had to make judgments. He knew he was dealing in a world of ambiguity but had to sort out the pieces and go on from there."

—Tim Warren